

Some of you may be wondering why you're here. Yes, you know that we're celebrating the resurrection. But you're wondering if you can really believe it. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? After all, in the 1st century, dead people usually didn't come out of their graves. And in the 21st century, the only dead people that rise from their graves tend to be either zombies or vampires in a horror movie.

So here we are, gathered together to celebrate an event that is unlikely, improbable, and certainly out of the ordinary: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Can you really believe it happened?

This morning, I want to listen again to the testimony of someone who was there that first Easter. I want to hear from one of the original witnesses to the resurrection.

There are many such witnesses we could look at. About 20 years after Easter, Paul wrote to the Corinthian church that there were over 500 witnesses who personally had seen the Risen Lord. He added that most of them were still alive at the time he wrote his Epistle. There was no shortage of witnesses in the early Church.

But this morning, I want to focus on the testimony of one witness. He is referred to as the Beloved Disciple, or the Disciple whom Jesus loved. His testimony is found in the Gospel According to John. He is traditionally regarded as the Apostle John. And the Gospel According to John is based squarely on his eyewitness testimony.

John has been there as a witness during Jesus ministry. He's been there in Jerusalem. He sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper. He stood at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. He witnessed Jesus' death firsthand. The Gospel of John makes a big deal of this.

In fact, we heard about it on Good Friday from John ch19. After Jesus dies on the cross, after the soldier stabs him with the spear, the writer of John makes this point:

"He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth."¹

In other words, 'this is based on firsthand, eyewitness testimony, and you can believe it.'

This morning we read from John ch20 (bulletins).

In ch20, we get the Easter testimony of that same beloved disciple. John tells us that that first Easter morning was very chaotic. There was a swirl of activity. There was a whirlwind of emotions.

v1 Mary Magdalene has come to the tomb and finds the stone rolled away.

¹ John 19:35

Imagine what that must have been like. Imagine for a moment that you were in a cemetery to visit the grave of a friend or a loved one. You get to their grave, see a pile of dirt, and a hole in the ground. And at the bottom of the hole, your friend's casket is open, but there's no body in it.

Now, I don't know about the rest of you, but my first assumption would NOT be, "My friend has been resurrected. Glory to God, it's a miracle!"

Instead, I'd probably be dialing 911. I'd be getting ready to file a police report about grave robbery. Or I might be driving over to the cemetery office, getting ready to chew somebody out. "What did you do with my friend's body? Why did you dig it up?"

There would be a surge of adrenaline and a swirl of emotions. But the last thing I'd ever be thinking is, "Alleluia, my friend is risen."

So, v2 when Mary runs back to tell Peter and John, she jumps to a the logical, though incorrect conclusion: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

v3 At such terrible news, Peter and John start running to the tomb.

Don't miss that verb. Running. There's very little running in scripture. And yet in the chaos of that first Easter morning, running seems to be the right move. Mary running to the disciples. Peter and John running to the tomb.

v4 As they race to the tomb, John runs faster and gets to the there first.

v5 He stops and looks into the tomb, but he doesn't go in. However, he sees the Jesus' grave cloths, the linen wrappings lying there.

v6 Peter arrives and goes right in. And we're told in the middle of v6 what Peter sees. Listen to this eyewitness description:

"He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself."

v8 Then John enters the tomb. And we're told at this point, "He saw and believed." He saw and believed.

All the chaos. All the confusion. All the running back and forth. All the swirling emotions. And yet it focuses down to a moment of crystal clarity. John sees the linen wrappings. He sees the cloth that covered Jesus' head. He sees, and he **believes**.

Of course, the question for us is, "How could this be? How could a couple of pieces of cloth make him believe?" We'll get back to that question in a minute.

To try to understand what's happening, I want to tell you about a friend of mine named Lee. Lee died this past winter. But many decades ago, Lee was an eyewitness to one of the most important events in the 20th century. I think Lee's experience and testimony as an eyewitness will help us understand John's experience and testimony as an eyewitness.

One morning, Lee was looking out of the porthole of the ship he was on. He saw some planes flying a mile or two south of his ship. Some of them started diving on a nearby island, and all of a sudden, there were explosions and black smoke.

He thought, "Somebody goofed big this time. They loaded live bombs on those planes by mistake. What a SNAFU." Lee, being a pharmacist's mate in the Navy, says that he thought he knew who it was. He thought, 'Only the Marines would have been dumb enough to load live ordinance on those planes.'

But then there was an explosion nearby, and Lee felt his ship start to lurch sideways. General quarters sounded, and Lee started running toward his battle station. Then there was another explosion, which knocked him off his feet. He got to his battle station, and said that everyone was wondering, "What kind of a drill is this?" Then the ship started to list.

A few minutes later, the call came, "Abandon ship, abandon ship." Lee ran up onto the deck. And since the ship was leaning, he decided to take a running dive off the side. But there was another explosion, which caused him lose his balance and he "skid(ed) down the barnacle encrusted hull into the water."

When he bobbed to the surface, he saw a small boat pulling men out of the water. He started to swim toward it, when all of a sudden he saw a line of machine gun bullets hitting the water a few feet in front of him in a strafing run toward the boat. At that point he decided it would be safer to swim towards the shore by himself, rather than getting into that boat.

But as the fighter banked away, Lee saw it's insignia for the first time. It was a red circle, the Japanese Rising Sun. As the battleship Utah sunk behind him into the waters of Pearl Harbor that morning of December 7, 1941, that glimpse of the red circle of the fighter's insignia was Lee's first indication of what was really going on.

Everything had been swirling around and chaotic. When the bombing started, Lee was confused. 'Why are American planes dropping bombs?' He later said, "It didn't occur to me that these were enemy planes. It was too incredible!" And on the ship, even after a couple of explosions, Lee and his friends still hadn't figured things out. "What kind of a drill is this?" they asked each other.

But when Lee saw the red circles, the Rising Sun insignia on the wings of the fighter, everything clicked. That one detail brought everything else into focus. There was a sudden moment of realization. Those are Japanese planes. And this is a sneak attack.

The same sort of moment of realization happens for John in the empty tomb. He goes in. He sees the linen wrappings lying there. He sees the separate cloth that covered Jesus' head rolled up in a separate place. And that's enough. He believes.

He realizes, "This is no grave robbery." Grave robbers wouldn't have taken the time to unwrap the body. If you broke into a museum to steal a mummy, you certainly wouldn't waste time unwrapping it. And if you did, you wouldn't put the wrappings back in a nice neat fashion.

John had originally run to the tomb because Mary had said that someone had taken the body. But when John saw the wrappings, he realized that was not the case.

It didn't look like a body that had been unwrapped. Instead, it looked as if the body had somehow mysteriously evaporated, leaving its wrappings behind. John did not go to the tomb because he believed Jesus had risen. John believed Jesus had risen because of what he had seen in the tomb.

This is further amplified by v9: "As yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

John did not go there with preconceived notions about Jesus rising. He was not predisposed to believe based on scripture. That understanding would come later. He believed because of what he saw.

Of course, Jesus appeared later to Mary. He appeared to the disciples. He appeared to many others. That's icing on the cake. But for John, belief comes based on the evidence he saw in the empty tomb.

And that's why it's so important for the writer of the Gospel to say to all his readers, "He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth."

Because, if you think about it, we're in the same kind of situation as the Beloved Disciple. Other disciples believed only when they saw the resurrected Jesus. But John believed in the resurrection based only upon the evidence, long before he saw Jesus face to face.

And John has a message for you. He wants you to believe also, based upon the evidence and the testimony he presents. And that's why the Gospel of John is summed up at the end of ch20, with these words:

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."²

² John 20:30-31

For John, belief is everything. John doesn't tell you these things so that you may know what happened intellectually. He tells you these things so that you may believe what happened. He tells you these things so that you may bet your life on what happened.

This is the greatest turning point in history. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. In the midst of the stress and the chaos of daily living, in the midst of the swirl and the whirlwind, let that fact sink in. Let the Good News of the Resurrection bring clarity to your life.

The Risen Jesus still calls you to believe. Knowledge of Jesus is not limited to his first disciples. Relationship with Jesus is not limited to his first disciples. Instead, that kind of relationship is open to us. The presence of Jesus is still in our midst. We can meet him through the pages of scripture. We can meet him at his table, in the sacrament of his Body and Blood. We can meet him through the actions of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

This morning, John invites you to share the new life that Jesus brings. Believe in him. Come to his table. Open your self to him. Share in the power of his Resurrection. Let him bring new life, and new focus, to your life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.